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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 001032

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: END-OF-TOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE KURDISH  
ISSUE

REF: A. ANKARA 1003 (EXDIS)

[1](#)B. ANKARA 951

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Eric Green for reasons 1.4(b,d)

INTRODUCTION: KURDS SUPPORT US, DEMOCRACY  
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[1](#)1. (U) This is a Consulate Adana cable. It distills my observations on the Kurdish issue following three years service as Principal Officer.

[1](#)2. (C) I first ventured east of the Euphrates in August, [1](#)2006. Turkish grievances against the U.S. were numerous and intensifying. The war in Iraq seemed to be out of control; the PKK (Kurdistan Workers, Party) had found safety in Northern Iraq; some Turks saw these developments as designed to weaken if not divide their country. Kurds portrayed the situation much differently: they were grateful to America for liberating Iraqi Kurdistan and they believed spreading democracy in the Middle East should lead to better treatment of Kurds by Turkey. Even before tea had been served in my first meeting with a mayor from the pro-Kurdish DTP (Democratic Society Party), he proclaimed, "I love what President Bush is doing in the Middle East." I never heard this sentiment uttered west of the Euphrates.

KURDISH ISSUE AS CRUCIBLE  
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[1](#)3. (C) The Kurdish issue is the crucible in which Turkey's most contested arguments take place: the roles of civilian and military institutions in governing the country and the nature of Turkish citizenship and identity. Because the Kurdish issue is linked with these problems, an ultimate resolution depends on Turkey successfully evolving into a modern, accountable democracy. Kurds are facing an equally important crossroads as they need to modernize a ethno-nationalist movement whose strategy is obscure and whose tactics appear little evolved from Maoist-style peasant rebellion. Until Kurdish leaders behave more maturely, their actions will retard rather than accelerate the changes Turkey needs. Despite these problems, the GOT is making headway on the Kurdish issue, tolerating linguistic and cultural freedoms that were unthinkable less than ten years ago.

14. (C) As Americans, we have unique entre to both Turkish and Kurdish players in this conflict, so we are in a position to draw conclusions based on a variety of perspectives. The main conclusion is that Turks and Kurds are not destined to live in conflict. The United States, as a trusted friend to both sides, has a role to play in helping them find peace.

DIYARBAKIR AND BELFAST  
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15. (C) The Kurdish problem is caused by a movement for recognition of Kurds' distinct ethnic identity clashing with a conservative state uses mono-ethnic nationalism as a source of legitimacy; the movement enjoys widespread support in southeastern Turkey and is also supported by a terrorist organization, the PKK. Because it is a multilayered problem, its solution requires diplomatic, economic, security and political measures. The Northern Ireland peace process, on which I worked for five years prior to my service in Adana, offers some instructive parallels with the Kurdish issue.

16. (C) Ending the Northern Ireland conflict was possible after leaders in Britain and Ireland realized their bilateral partnership was too important to be sacrificed to timeworn ethnic antagonisms. Thanks in great part to American diplomacy, the GOT-Iraq relationship could play a similar role with the Kurdish issue. Three years ago, many Turks regarded the new Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq as an existential threat and the KRG responded by turning a blind eye to PKK activities on its territory. The GOT and the KRG have since made remarkable progress in setting aside dated animosities to concentrate on mutual

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interests: economic development, limiting Iranian influence and stabilizing Iraq. The level of trust is still wanting, but the shift has put the KRG in a position to contribute to a resolution of Turkey's Kurdish issue by pressuring the PKK and helping facilitate exile for its leadership. Equally important, a pragmatic KRG that eschews notions of a "greater Kurdistan" will give Turkey more confidence in allowing its Kurds more rights.

17. (C) UK-supported economic support and breakneck growth in the Republic of Ireland also contributed to the solution in Northern Ireland -- the bigger the middle class, the more people want stability. Economically, life for the vast majority in southeastern Turkey is still a grind: villages are either empty following the evacuations of the 1990s or they are struggling to support too many people on too little land. Aside from agriculture, which for many operates at barely subsistence level, the region depends heavily on government spending (including about 70,000 village guards who support a half million family members), remittances and illicit activity. The cities are burdened with young populations, low levels of education and rampant unemployment. The most remote provinces such as Hakkari will always lag due to their inaccessible, mountainous locations; but cities such as Diyarbakir and Sanliurfa have potential in trade, manufacturing and tourism. Export powerhouse Gaziantep, which is less than two hours drive west from Sanliurfa, shows that cities once considered "peripheral" can change their image and attract investment by encouraging entrepreneurship. The massive Southeastern Anatolian Project (GAP) infrastructure program addresses part of the need, but the government should also focus on creating stable conditions for small and medium sized manufacturers to develop.

18. (C) The diplomatic and economic tasks are easy compared with the political and security challenges. In the Northern Ireland case, Britain's evolution into a post-nationalist, post-imperial consciousness meant there was scope for flexibility and innovation when designing new political institutions for the province and a new relationship between Britain and Ireland. For a lasting solution to the Kurdish

issue, Turkey as a whole needs to undergo a similar evolution that includes modernization of Kemalism's fundamental tenets; most critically, the definition of Turkish citizenship must encompass multiple ethnic and religious identities. Democratization must continue.

¶9. (C) Disarming the PKK also requires breaking with entrenched Turkish practices. In Northern Ireland after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) created new political opportunities, the IRA became a liability for the republican movement, which shifted focus to civilian politics through Sinn Fein. A decade later, the IRA was effectively dissolved and Sinn Fein is now part of the province's ruling coalition.

This shift required the UK government to live for years with the uncomfortable ambiguity of negotiating with Sinn Fein even as the IRA, armed and lethal, remained lurking in the background.

¶10. (C) There are two obstacles, conceptual and practical, to overcome before Turkey could begin a negotiation akin to the GFA. Conceptually, Turkey has not yet defined itself as a modern, multiethnic democracy; as a consequence there is no sense of what an acceptable end-state would look like. Intra-elite friction over normalizing relations with Armenia -- and the ease with which nationalist chest-beating has hijacked the debate -- shows the risks of taking on sensitive identity problems before laying the proper groundwork. Related to this is the very practical problem that the GOT cannot agree on whom it should deal with, should such a negotiation take place. The PKK is clear that it must be at the table and has hinted it would be open to using intermediaries or surrogates so the government would not be negotiating with terrorists. This is soluble, but not easily in Turkey's with-us-or-against-us political culture.

TURKISH GOVERNMENT: GRADUALLY TAKING OWNERSHIP

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¶11. (C) While Turkey appears some distance away from comprehensive negotiations on the Kurdish issue, there is now consensus that there is in fact a Kurdish problem and that military means alone are insufficient to end PKK terrorism. Beyond these generalities, however, policy on the Kurdish issue is fragmented: with the Presidency, the Prime Minister, individual ministries, the military and the judiciary all pursuing different and sometimes contradictory approaches. How to deal with DTP, which has elected representatives in Parliament, shows these tensions. President Gul has met with the DTP and said the Kurdish problem can be solved through negotiation while opposition parties, the military and judiciary regard the DTP as a terrorist front and thus an unacceptable interlocutor for the government. Prime Minister Erdogan has waffled: on one hand he has shattered several taboos by establishing a Kurdish-language channel on state TV and forthrightly acknowledged the Kurdish problem, but he refuses to meet with the DTP, let alone accept them as a partner for solving the problem.

¶12. (C) In sum, civilian Turkish institutions are now playing a bigger role on Kurdish issues and they are pursuing policies that would have been heretical less than a decade ago. The shadowy "deep state" is no longer the sole driver of GOT policy towards the Kurds as it was in the '80s and '90s. The deep state has given way to a less opaque, increasingly disputatious state in which the old guard security/judicial establishment, which still views the Kurdish issue through a zero-sum prism, is jockeying with officials who embrace the logic of using the DTP to channel Kurdish demands and work with the GOT to disarm the PKK.

KURDISH POLITICS: READY TO SAY GOOD-BYE TO CHE?

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¶14. (C) Just as calcified GOT institutions need to reform

more to meet the needs of a 21st century democracy, PKK-dominated Kurdish political institutions are even more out of step with their community. Kurds in Turkey fall roughly into three categories: the "incorrigibles," a small minority who reject both the cultural and civic aspects of Turkish identity and demand political separation; in the southeast a large majority of Kurds accept their political status as Turkish citizens but want the Turkish state to acknowledge and accommodate Kurds' distinct cultural and linguistic identity. The third group, assimilated Kurds, fully embrace Turkish civic and cultural identities, even if they were raised speaking Kurdish.

¶15. (C) Even as the vast majority of Kurds favor modest political reform through peaceful means, the PKK paradoxically enjoys widespread legitimacy and a virtual monopoly on political activity in the region. The legitimacy derives from the PKK's success at putting the Kurdish cause on the agenda 25 years ago and its propagation of self-serving myths such as leader Ocalan's status as a living martyr and the PKK's role as "protector" of the weak. In fact, poor Kurds living in the slums of Diyarbakir are in no way protected by the PKK. Their interests are in a growing economy, a better educational system and more accountable, democratic government, none of which the PKK can deliver. Iraqi President (and Kurdish icon) Jalal Talabani said it best: "The Che Guevara era is over."

¶16. (C) The PKK's intransigence is so clearly counter to Kurds' own interests that many Kurds -- even those disinclined to believe conspiracy theories -- believe the PKK is in overt or tacit cooperation with elements of the deep state intent on blocking progress. Yet there are also strong signals that the PKK leadership in Northern Iraq wants an exit strategy. Part of a deal will include some symbolic concessions both to justify Kurdish sacrifices and to persuade the movement's hard-liners to go along. Saving themselves from prison is near the top of the agenda, which means the GOT will need to confront the politically radioactive question of amnesty. Another unanswered question

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is to what extent the PKK's business interests (extortion, human and narcotics trafficking, smuggling) will produce internal resistance to efforts to end the conflict. (The IRA's mafia-like activities also caused numerous set-backs in the Northern Ireland process.)

#### CONCLUSIONS

¶17. (C) In the near term, we can expect the AKP government to continue to improve its management of the Kurdish issue, even if a comprehensive solution must wait until Turkey reaches a new, more democratic equilibrium that embraces Kurdish and other identities. This involves relatively low-cost concessions to Kurdish identity (expanded broadcasting opportunities, restoring Kurdish names to villages, "Kurdology" departments in universities), old-fashioned service delivery (building roads, schools, clinics) and moves to improve PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's prison conditions. If the government agreed to talk with the DTP, that would ease tensions further.

¶18. (C) Many Kurds believe only outside pressure will induce progress. Until recently, reformers believed Turkey's convergence with EU democratic norms would be the silver bullet. But Kurds have been disappointed by growing opposition to Turkey's goal of EU membership and frustrated with the EU's reluctance to push the GOT harder on political reform. They see the EU as a distant voice that only deals with human rights in the abstract rather than as a force that pushes for concrete reforms that would advance Kurdish goals.

¶19. (C) This leaves the United States. Kurds in Turkey yearn for the U.S. to insert itself in the process and forge a

settlement as it did in Northern Ireland while the GOT is loath to involve outside parties. Even if American mediation is not welcome, the U.S. can help by continuing to support bilateral (U.S. and Turkey) and trilateral (plus Iraq) efforts to counter the PKK and by intensifying efforts within Iraq to resolve KRG boundary issues, especially Kirkuk. Success there would solidify the Turkish-KRG partnership and give Turkey confidence to act more boldly on the Kurdish issue domestically.

¶20. (C) Meanwhile, we should raise our voices more to urge both the GOT and the Kurds to end the violence and adopt more pragmatic positions. President Obama's public statements and his meeting with the DTP, along with Ambassador Jeffrey's June visit to Diyarbakir, have set the tone in this regard. There may also be opportunities to support non-official dialogue among NGOs from Turkey and international experts. Such conferences are still too rare, in part because the PKK often tries to block the free exchange of ideas. U.S. sponsorship of such efforts would reinforce the message that dialogue is needed for a solution.

¶21. (C) If over time these efforts create an opening to mediate, then by all means we should seize the opportunity. An initial goal may be to negotiate a genuine cease-fire (in contrast to the faux cease-fires announced periodically by the PKK); ending the violence would free both sides to consider a broader range of options. And even if formal negotiations did not begin immediately or were stalled, a period of peace would provide space to ease the attitudinal changes both sides need in order to transform this part of Upper Mesopotamia from a region of suffering into a region of stability.

¶22. (U) The Ambassador has read this cable and agrees strongly with its analysis and recommendations, which track closely with those of REF A paragraph 10.

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JEFFREY